

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine



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Obviously, one reason why murder doesn't pay is the labor involved. No matter how you whittle and cut corners, the job must include killing someone—though I've been told by economists that this is a negligible factor in the price structure, overhead breakdown. But where murder really runs into money is in the long drawn out chore of not getting caught. Why have you heard the rent they have the nerve to ask for hideaways lately?



Sound Alibi

by Steve O'Donnell

DR. MCLANE put his hand on the phone. My eyes narrowed. "Just what the devil do you think you're doing?"

"I'm going to call the police. I have no intention of being blackmailed."

"You're not thinking, doctor," I snapped. "It's hardly intelligent for one of our most eminent heart specialists to ruin his career for the relatively small sum of five thousand dollars."

Dr. McLane was a tall, dry man with graying hair. "I'm not stupid enough to believe that giving you the money will be the end of it. You'll be back again and again."

That was quite true, but I wasn't going to admit it. "Doctor, I'm not a greedy man. Five thousand will be quite sufficient."

He studied me for a few moments. "Just how did you happen to find out about me?"

I smiled. "We are both specialists in our own fields, doctor. You have probably listened to a hundred thousand heartbeats and they have told you many things. I too listen, and study, and investigate. These are the attributes of a good lawyer, and for appearance's sake at least, I maintain an office."

I permitted myself to relax a bit, enough to needle him by asking, "You served three years, didn't you? Larceny, wasn't it?"

He flushed angrily. "That was over thirty years ago and I was innocent."

I clicked my tongue. "Come now, doctor. Does that really make any difference? The point is that you are a former convict. I don't think your patients will like that."

He kept his eyes on me and when he finally spoke his voice was tired. "You are quite right. My innocence and all the rest of it make no difference now."

His face was lined. "I am a collector of heartbeats. As you said, I have listened to a hundred thousand of them." He smiled faintly. "I have listened to mine too. It is not important to me now what the world or anyone in it thinks of me. I have less than two months to live, even if I am careful."

He lifted the phone from the cradle. "I believe I'll be helping the other unfortunates whom you must be victimizing."

My temper erupted. This stupid old man could spoil everything for me—the work of years. My hand closed on a heavy ashtray.

He was dialing when I struck. He staggered and dropped the phone. I hit him again and again until he collapsed to the floor.

I stood over him, cursing, watching the rug darken with his blood. When I realized the seriousness of what I had done, my anger was gone and fear had taken its place. I knelt beside the doctor and lifted his wrist. There was no pulse.

I stood up and automatically returned the phone to its cradle.

I started for the door, but stopped abruptly before I reached it. Running away would do no good. There was Collins, Dr. McLane's secretary, to be considered. He had just been leaving for the day when I had rung the doorbell.

I took out my handkerchief and wiped my forehead. I couldn't run. Something else had to be thought of.

I moved restlessly about the large cluttered living room. The door at one end opened to a medium-sized study whose walls and ceiling were covered with acoustical tiles. A large desk and two filing cabinets occupied one side of it. One wall was devoted to shelves containing hundreds of phonograph records. A walnut-colored record player was near the desk.

I stared at the walls as an idea slowly formed. Putting that idea to work would be tricky, but it seemed to me the only possible way out.

I went to the phone and dialed Walt Matson at his home. When he answered, I gave him Dr. McLane's address. "I want you over here right away. Now don't give me any excuses."

His voice was querulous. "I can't do that. I got a meeting to address tonight."

I gripped the phone. "I'm not asking you to come, Walt. I'm telling you."

"But this meeting's important."

"In that case," I said, speaking clearly, sharply, "I guess a lot of people will be interested in knowing that the honorable Walter Matson, Chairman of the City Council, has his finger in the pie every time the city buys a piece of property."

There was a long pause and then Matson said, "I'll be there."

I cut the connection and immediately dialed Mona Saunder's number. She put up a stubborn front too, but I had a few sentences for her that made her change her mind.

The next twenty minutes were painfully long. I kept glancing at my watch. Finally at eight-thirty, I heard the front doorbell ring.

I made certain it was Mona Saunders before I opened the door.

Her eyes were hostile; impatience and anger were in her movements. "Just what are you up to now?" she demanded. "I told you I can't get any more money right now. Not a cent."

Walt Matson's car pulled up behind Mona's at the curb, and I waited at the door.

He was a big man running to fat and his face was red with annoyance. "What the hell is it this time? I told you not to push me too far."

I led them both into the living room. They stopped short when they saw Dr. McLane's body.

Walt's face went white, but Mona didn't appear to be disturbed. It wasn't the first time she'd seen a murdered man. She glanced at me. "What is this all about?"

"You two are going to be my alibi."

Walt's eyes widened. "I can't do anything for you. I'm sorry—but I can't cover for murder."

"You don't have a choice," I said, with a great show of calm. "You're accustomed to the pleasure of the good things of life. So I don't think you'll like what they put on the trays at Joliet. If I sink, I'll pull both of you down with me."

Mona's eyes wandered back to the body for a moment. She was in her late twenties, slim, and though there was a hardness in her she could conceal it when it suited her purpose. She came to the point. "What are we supposed to do?"

I went to the far end of the living room and opened the door. "This is the doctor's study. All three of us were in here when the doctor was killed."

Mona smiled thinly. "Why were we in that room? I imagine the police might want to know."

I rubbed at the tightness in my neck as I thought it out. "According to the newspapers, McLane's been campaigning for another hospital to be built on the north side."

I paced the room. "Mona, you came to me with an offer to contribute money to the doctor's fund."

Mona's laugh was forced and bitter. "That's a good one. Why Wayne wouldn't give me a cent now. Even for something like that."

"I don't care whether he would or he wouldn't. The point is you thought you could persuade him, to. You thought if you could arrange all the details, he'd kick in the cash. That's because you know your husband's a nice guy underneath all that money he's got."

I resumed my pacing. "Because I'm a lawyer, you wanted me to arrange the details. I was to get in touch with Dr. McLane and arrange an appointment. You wanted to meet him."

I stopped in front of Walt. "I got you here because you're a city official. I suggested to the doctor that it would be wise to consult you about the best location for the hospital."

I rubbed my forehead hard, remembering Collins, Dr. McLane's secretary, who probably arranged all the doctor's appointments. "Neither of you had a formal appointment. I just phoned both of you, after speaking to Dr. McLane."

Walt's jaws quivered nervously as he nodded his head.

Mona's eye glittered. "It looks to me like this time we've got the cards. This is your turn to crawl for favors."

I smiled tightly. "I don't have to crawl, Mona. What ever gave you that idea? I can always remind the police to dig up your first husband's body. The one, you recall, who had no money and wouldn't give you a divorce when you met Wayne."

She thought that over, then nodded tightly. "We'll have it your way," she said.

"All right," I said. "Now listen. We were all about to go into the study when the front doorbell rang. Dr. McLane excused himself; he was going to answer it. He told us to go on into the study and wait for him there. We went into the study and closed the door. Remember that. We closed the door."

I took a deep breath, let it out . . . "Now we don't know who rang the doorbell. We didn't see him or her. We conducted small talk among ourselves for about twenty-five minutes and then we began to wonder what was keeping the doctor."

"Finally you, Walt, opened the door to the living room and all three of us saw the body at the same time. None of us was ever alone with the doctor. Even for a second after he left to answer the doorbell. That's our story and nothing more. The less we say, the fewer mistakes we're likely to make."

Walt's fleshy face was moist. "Don't you think

we should have heard something? At—at least the body falling?"

I shook my head. "No. We were in the study and the door was closed. That room is soundproof or practically soundproof. If we'd have heard any noise, the police will want to know why we didn't rush out and get a look at the murderer."

They had no more questions or suggestions.

I picked up the phone and dialed the operator. "Will you please connect me with the police? This is an emergency."

Sergeant Harrison watched the body being carried out in a wicker basket. "It's surprising," he said, "that none of you heard anything. I should think one of you would have heard a cry, or the sound of the doctor falling."

Mona shook her head. "No. We heard nothing."

Harrison turned to Dr. McLane's secretary. "And you're certain the doctor had no enemies?"

Collins was a small diffident man. The police had brought him to the house shortly after their arrival. He shook his head. "Dr. McLane was well liked by all who knew him."

Harrison nodded absently. "It must take a lot of presence of mind to kill a man while there are three people in the next room."

I tried to keep the impatience out of my voice. I'd already provided him with an answer twice before. "If we didn't hear anything," I said, "then it follows that most likely the murderer couldn't hear us. He must have thought the doctor was alone in the house."

Harrison had gray hair and light blue eyes that at times appeared almost vague. He moved to the study door. "I'd like to have all of you come in here." He turned to one of the uniformed men. "When I close the door, drop one of those book ends on the floor a few times."

We filed into the study and Harrison closed the door. After a few moments, we heard a dull thud from the next room.

Harrison looked at me. "Apparently this room isn't as soundproof as you seem to think."

I forced a smile. "You forget, Sergeant, we were in here talking. That might have had something to do with our not hearing anything."

The noise came again and this time it had been in the middle of my last sentence.

"Sergeant," I said, "you're assuming Dr. McLane cried out or dropped heavily to the floor. Maybe that wasn't the case at all."

That should have ended it, but Walt was too nervous to think clearly. "The phonograph was playing," he blurted out. "That's why we didn't hear any noise."

I had difficulty concealing my anger. The damn fool. The more there was to our story, the more chance there would be to find flaws in it. But he had committed us, and I had to back him up.

"Yes," I said. "I forgot about that. The phonograph was playing. It was playing when we entered the study."

Harrison smiled thoughtfully at the ceiling. "Wasn't it difficult to discuss anything with that thing going?"

I stifled my irritation. "It was playing softly. More or less background music."

There was a flicker in Collins' eyes. He opened his mouth as though to say something and then hesitated.

Harrison spoke to me. "I suppose you couldn't remember what records were playing?"

I shook my head. "No."

Mona took my cue. "Neither can I, Sergeant. I haven't much of an ear for music."

When I spoke again, my irritation showed. "What difference does it make?"

Harrison smiled. "I don't know that it makes any difference at all. I just like to round up as many facts as possible."

Walt moistened his thick lips. "I think it was classical music."

It was difficult for me not to glare at him, at his perspiring flabby face.

Collins cleared his throat. "Dr. McLane had a large collection of what are generally termed classical records. He preferred that type of music."

Harrison walked to the record player and lifted the lid. "There aren't any records in this machine now."

I breathed heavily. "I must have put them back on the shelves after the last one played. Maybe I shouldn't have done that, considering you think them so important. But I did. Is that a criminal offense?"

Collins smiled faintly. "Dr. McLane had quite an extensive collection of classical records, but he didn't keep them in this room."

My temper got out of hand again. "Just what do you call all of these?"

Collins moved to the record racks. His eyes traveled along a shelf and he made a selection. "I think this one should be particularly appropriate. Dr. McLane was a collector, but a rather unique one. His collection was more than a hobby; it was part of his work."

He put the record on the machine and switched it on. "This particular record is entitled 'Dr. James McLane.'"

I listened to the strange thumping for a few seconds and suddenly, with a stab of panic, I realized what I was hearing.

Collins indicated the shelves. "Dr. McLane was a heart specialist and he collected heartbeats. These are the records of his patients, of famous men, of animals, of himself."

I looked at Mona and Walt. Walt would be the first to crack. And I could see it in Mona's eyes that she wasn't thinking of me and my troubles any more. She was thinking about her first husband and what she would tell the police concerning his death.

Harrison smiled as he watched me. And there was no sound in the room, but the beating of a dead man's heart.

